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A BOOT-STRAP OPPORTUNITY

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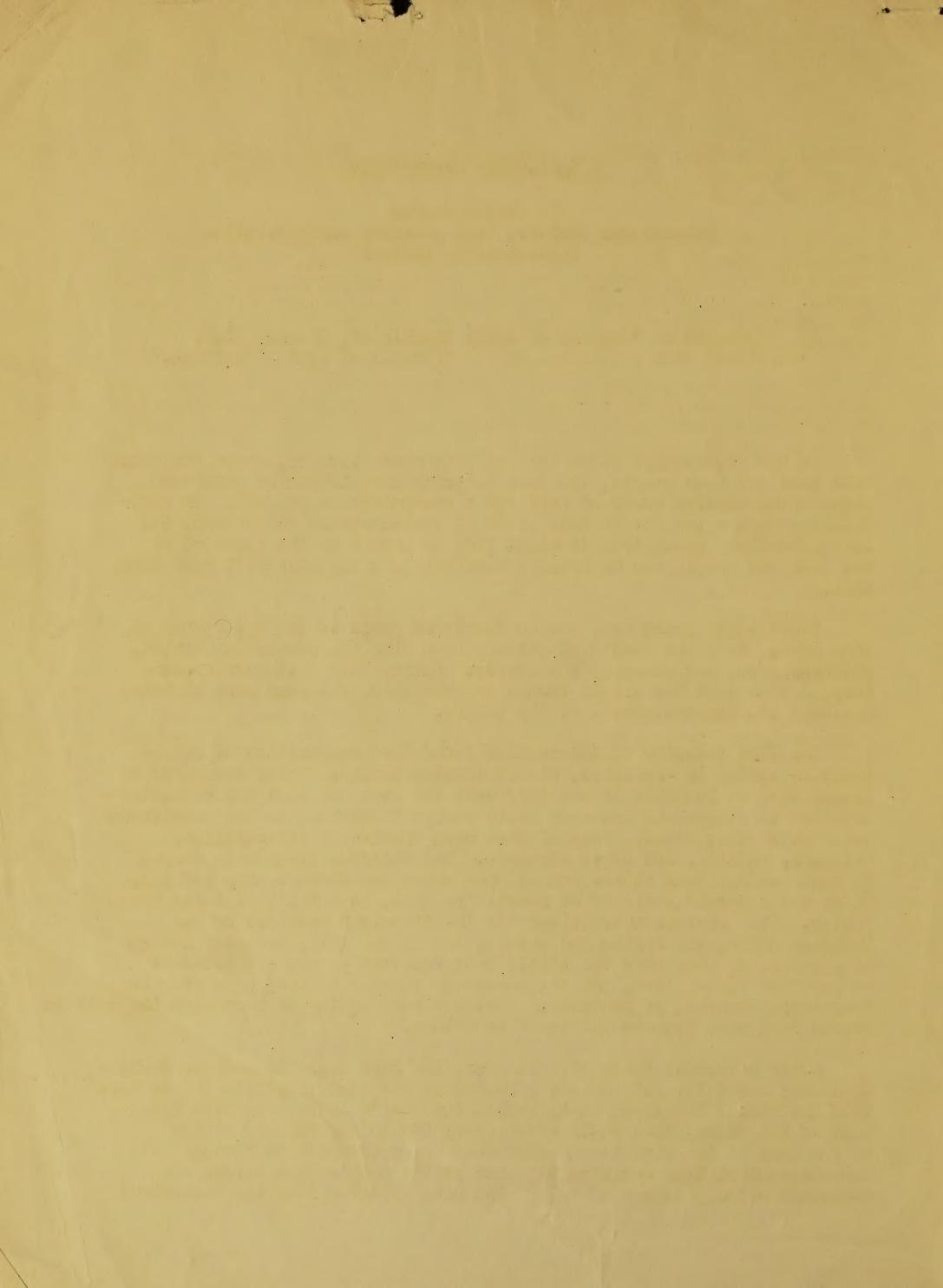
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In the Mississippi Delta area of southeast Missouri, where one finds rich land and poor people, the Farm Security Administration purchased sixty-seven hundred acres of land for a demonstration project. By establishing such a project in this land of sharecroppers and cotton, the Administration hoped that it might find an answer to the question of how land and people can be brought together in a way that will save them both.

Twenty-five years ago, cotton displaced grain as the major crop in this area. With the coming of cotton, came also the plantation system, sharecroppers, and one-crop philosophy. During this last quarter-century, a rich soil has slowly become impoverished, but even more alarming has been the impoverishment of the people.

The Farm Security Administration found here communities of sharecroppers living in unpainted, dismal-looking shacks. Their standards of living were so low that it was difficult for even the most understanding outsider to comprehend how they could resign themselves to the conditions under which they lived. Many of them were victims of malnutrition, pellagra, malaria, and other diseases. The children frequently stayed at home rather than attend school when shoes and clothes were lacking. There was a marked scarcity of nourishing food, especially milk and vegetables. The sharecroppers lived off the "furnish" provided by the landlord during the spring and summer, and in the fall, when the cotton crop was sold, they used the little cash received to pay old debts or to purchase flour, lard, and the necessary staples to tide them over the long winter months, if possible. Families were trying to keep warm and well in shacks that were "air-conditioned" by nature.

After a careful study of this area, the Farm Security workers decided that they would lay out the acres bought by the Administration in one hundred individual farms and that, rather than carry on an extensive process of selection, they would offer every family working and living on the land at the time it was purchased an opportunity to remain. The announcement of this decision was made to the people just before the Christmas holiday season of 1937. The news traveled like the proverbial



wildfire. Cousins, brothers, uncles, and friends came from far and near to ask, "How can we get on one of these places?" or "Can a man the likes of me get a chance?"

There were sixty white families and forty Negro families living on the land. Most of them had been on the move for years—migrants from Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, the Old South, and the Southern Appalachian areas. They could not quite believe that they were going to be allowed to stay where they were. Nor were they at all certain as to what the new chance would mean. It was an astounding Christmas for them.

The beginning of the year 1938 brought action to prove that the promised miracle was really taking place. It also brought many new things to be learned, new responsibilities to be met, and the realization that training and education were necessary.

First of all, the new landlord, Uncle Sam, offered furnish in a new way. Individually, in groups, and in mass meetings attended by all the families, the people were invited to discuss plans which, when carried through, would make them established farmers in an established community. Thus, the long days and evenings of winter, which they had formerly spent around a quick-heating box-stove in their own shacks, or at the back of the crossroad grocery store, were now occupied in attending friendly meetings. By ten o'clock in the evening, weary staff members were ready to leave these gatherings, but the insatiable curiosity and interest of the sharecroppers permitted no early dispersal. There were too many things to be talked over—the immediate future, the possibilities of trying out a new way of farming, the diversification of crops, small ventures in the raising of livestock, the need of new equipment for home and farm. As a result, many sessions closed at midnight, and then only because the flickering light from a smoky kerosene lamp threatened a blackout.

All this was new and exciting to these poor people. Victims of geographical and economic determinism, they had long since lost any vision they might once have had of a better life for themselves. Now to be encouraged to express their ideas, to get a sincere response from neighbors and friendly advisers, to discover that they could solve their present problems and perhaps even tackle bigger ones—these were thrilling experiences that brought new hope and courage.

In the past, they had not even thought of the possibility of owning a cow or two, or hogs enough to provide the winter meat supply. As one sharecropper said: "It's goin' to be pretty nice to look forward to havin' a bone with some meat on it this winter." Proper equipment and machinery, the advantages of good schools, facilities for health and recreation were luxuries they had never dreamed of enjoying. Such things were for "quality folks," not for poor folks like themselves.

But when they learned that, under the program of rehabilitation, it

would be possible for them, by making regular payments, to acquire their own livestock and equipment, they made applications for loans. Nor was that all. Why, they asked, could not the cotton gin and the store building, which were on the government land, be used for the benefit of all the families? Why should each of them have to buy machinery and equipment? Could they not pool their funds and share in the machinery purchased? What could be done to improve the health of their families? Suppose the ideas the men were pondering over were to become realities, how could they acquaint their wives and children with these astounding plans?

Even the fact that such questions arose in their minds was an encouraging sign that they were taking the necessary first step toward thoughtful living and intelligent cooperation. They were beginning to be somewhat aware of the resources available within themselves.

Even so, it was with considerable hesitancy, humility, and uncertainty of their own capacities, and still expecting decisions to be made for them, that these sharecroppers ventured into the field of cooperation. When they received from the State of Missouri the gold-embossed charter of their own La Forge Cooperative Association, they recognized for the first time that they were embarking upon a venture that would take them, in their thinking and activity, far beyond the limits of their previous interests. They were called upon to accept responsibilities with which they were almost entirely unfamiliar. They had to develop a new set of habits. But their advisers soon discovered that, while many of the things these people were starting to do were new to them and rather foreign to their previous ways of living, they did have latent capacities which responded, with surprising effect, to new opportunities. These are facts not to be overlooked or forgotten by those who believe that adult education can help to build a foundation for a democratic way of life.

As the Cooperative Association got under way, the election of officers and directors, the creation of committees, and the transaction of other business resulted in the continuation of group discussions among the members. In consequence there was a natural and healthy growth in the variety of their interests and in the number of community activities they participated in and were responsible for. Thus, while the primary objective of the La Forge Cooperative Association is to provide services--marketing, ginning, cooperative store, and so forth--services that will improve farming and business operations, the less tangible results, such as greater participation in neighborhood and community affairs, more profound interest in social and economic problems, a broadened vision of responsibilities and opportunities, may be regarded as the more significant achievement.

In the beginning, no formal teaching had a place in the program. "Learning by doing" was the method of education used. Gradually, however, as new interests developed, other types of education were introduced. For example, in the membership committees for both Negroes and whites, group discussions were started in order to keep the board of directors better informed about the reactions of the members of the cooperative.

Later, these discussions were broadened to include not only the pressing, immediate business problems of the Association, but also a study of the cooperative movement as such. The members of the women's advisory group were proud to offer the facilities of a small library that they had sponsored. Among the books found on the library shelves was the story of the Rochdale weavers of 1844. This story was reviewed in the membership groups.

The library itself was a noteworthy educational experiment. In connection with various phases of the rehabilitation program, the need for books soon became apparent. The women's advisory group discussed this need, and then proceeded to devise and carry out plans for earning the money with which to pay the express charges on packages of books borrowed from the Missouri State Library. From borrowing books to buying books was an obvious next step. When school opened for the fall term, a committee of women interviewed the new school principal and asked him to recommend a few books that they might purchase for the library. And so a book collection belonging to the people of the community was started.

Although these people were deeply concerned over the business policies of their organization and were zealously studying their by-laws and trying to find out about the experiences of long-lived cooperatives, they wanted to discuss other matters that were vital to them.

"We're havin' our chance now--but what good is it all if our boys and girls don't take hold?" "I'm aimin' to get my boy through high school this year--but what's goin' to happen then?" "Is there some way our bigger boys and girls can learn the co-op business? Why can't we soon hire help from our own?" "Will you all help make our children see what chances they will have if they go along with us in the co-op?" Efforts to find solutions to these and similar problems often prolonged the evening sessions far beyond the time devoted to the immediate business of the cooperative.

As an answer to a Negro who said, "How can I learn to read, an' write, an' figger? I want to be a good co-op man," the Work Projects Administration is supplying a teacher. The Negro men and women have formed a class and, though they meet in a rickety one-room school, poorly lighted by kerosene lamps and lanterns, they gather there eagerly three nights a week to bring the results of their homework to the sympathetic teacher.

This Negro class is only one outcome of those prolonged discussion meetings. Another is the appointment of qualified teachers by the school board. Still another is a plan to establish National Youth Administration work projects with their related educational programs for the boys and girls. Future attempts to enlist the interest and help of other governmental and private agencies for training and education will be far more successful because of the sharecroppers' spontaneous discussions, evolved

from their own thinking about their own problems.

The new principal of the school, who had made plans to organize a parent-teacher association, agreed, after conferring with members of the Farm Security staff, that these plans should be deferred. Rather, he caught the spirit of the rehabilitation work and began to realize how much better it will be to use the resources within the people themselves, as they learn to express their own needs and community interests. The teachers, with the close cooperation of staff members of the project, are developing a correlated home and school program, upon which will be based the truly effective P.T.A. of the future.

It is not difficult to understand that fundamental adjustments and changes have had to take place in the lives of these people during the period of transition from a one-crop system to diversified farming, from being sharecroppers to being not only owners of individual units, with their own livestock and equipment, but also members of an organization for cooperative buying and selling. In place of reliance upon the "boss-man" for management and instruction, there is now reliance upon their own information and initiative. Where once their energies were directed almost entirely to the cultivation of one crop, they now must know how to care for cows, mules, hogs, and poultry; how to raise corn, grain, grasses, and a variety of garden produce; and how to maintain and care for their new houses, their lawns, and the outbuildings. Before, they looked to the boss-man for furnish to tide them over from season to season. Now they must plan for the growing and canning of their own foods--and, by the way, every family on the project has earned a minimum of eighty quarts for each person. All these activities and responsibilities call into play information, skills, and intelligence that the sharecroppers formerly had no occasion to use. Thus, the transition is in itself a process of education for them. If their advisers had not been conscious of this fact, there could have been little hope for the success of the undertaking.

The problems involved in this particular project in southeast Missouri have been unusually difficult because the work of rehabilitation had to start from scratch. Much more promising ground for a project of this sort could be found in areas where cultural and educational facilities are already available and where the people themselves are better equipped to participate in a program of adult education. But certainly this situation offers a challenging opportunity to educators and social workers who believe that adults can learn, and that even those whom casual critics call "shiftless and no-count" respond eagerly to education if it is directly applied to the problems with which they are concerned, and is conducted in an informal, democratic way.

The families on the La Forge Farms have been fortunate in having as their community manager, Hans Baasch, whose early training and experience in the folk schools and the cooperative movement in Denmark admirably qualify him for this work. Under his leadership, it has been shown that "poor folks can learn to do for themselves" and that a dis-advantaged

rural area can be changed into a vital community, where men, women, and children, grateful for a new chance, may become healthier, happier, and more useful citizens. The La Forge people have found expression for their spiritual life, too, in the church and Sunday School which they have started.

And so, by taking these low-income rural people where they are and patiently developing the native resources within them--giving them a "boot-strap" opportunity, so to speak--encouraging progress has been made. For the workers who have been devoting themselves to this project probably no praise could be more heartening than the comment of the member of the cooperative board who said: "La Forge is a better place to live since we started our church and our co-op. We're better folks than we used to be."

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